

Is Life a Preparation for Martyrdom?

Version 49

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A Hassidic story: Is Martyrdom the Ideal...?

The following story¹ about the Baal Shem Tov (Besht) is relatively well known in Israel, as it was the subject of part of a popular musical play some 40 years ago:²

Once the Baal Shem Tov (Besht) dreamed that he arrived in Gan Eden, and discovered that his neighbor in Gan Eden was an ignorant Jew. When the Besht woke up in the morning, he was filled with curiosity regarding the identity of this unlearned Jew, and decided to find him.

The Besht went from village to village, asking if anyone knew the Jew as he described him from his dream.

Eventually the Besht arrived at a certain Jewish village where people confirmed that this Jew lived there and took the Besht to the man's house. The Besht knocked on his door. A destitute-looking woman opened the door, and the Besht asked for a place to sleep and eat. The woman welcomed the guest into the house, and shortly thereafter the Besht joined his host for supper. The Besht watched expectantly to see the exemplary conduct of this man, who merited being his neighbor in Gan Eden.

¹ A Hebrew version of the text of the story can be found at <http://shatat1hanezach.wordpress.com/>.

² This story is a part of the musical play *Ish Hassid Haya*.

Another version of this story, with even a stronger martyrological motif, can be found in Cohen, M., *Mipi Am*, Tel Aviv, 5739 (1979), 3rd volume, chapter 216, pp 28-29. See also musical play of Almagor, D., Bamot, 1969.

To his disappointment, the Besht instead beheld a crude person, both in appearance and behavior.

The man did not utter a single word and did not welcome his guest. Instead he began to eat (bread) without washing his hands, and without reciting the blessing for the bread. He continued to eat incessantly, stopping only to receive additional portions, and then continuing to eat without stopping. He continued this way until he seemed completely sated. Immediately after he finished eating, he left the table without saying the blessing after food, and went to sleep, paying no attention to his guest. During the following days, the same scenario repeated itself: the Jew did nothing but eat and eat, said no blessings, and uttered no words of Torah or even polite conversation. The Besht could not understand on what merit this Jew could deserve a place in Gan Eden. He could no longer withhold his curiosity, and told the host about his dream, asking him for an explanation.

The host looked at the Besht and started to tell his story: "A year ago there was a pogrom here. Cossacks attacked our village and killed many Jews.

They seized my father and set him on fire, and as my father was a thin man his body burned quickly and made only a small flame which rapidly went out. The next time Cossacks come, and perhaps set me on fire, I want to burn for a long time with a huge flame, such that the entire world can see how a Jew burns..."

I would like to share with the reader the strong feeling I experienced the first time I heard this story, an impression that continues to affect me even today when I tell it to others.

Let me emphasize that this is not a normal Hasidic story. There is something disturbing and unusual about it. Instead of concentrating on conveying ethical lessons or wisdom, as typical Hasidic stories do,³ this story gives a rather unusual portrayal of Jewish life as preparation to perform a final and decisive act of publicizing the death of a Jew among the nations of the world. This calls to mind (although it is not identical to) the halachically prescribed act of dying to sanctify God's name under certain specific circumstances, known as *kiddush haShem* (sanctification of [God's] Name), and also known in English as martyrdom.⁴

What does this story tell us? Can the message be that the Hasidic outlook on life can be expressed also by eating and drinking, when it is accompanied by a correct motivation to

³ See, for example, *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* (Shivhei Ha-Besht : the Earliest Collection of Legends About the Founder of Hasidism), J. Aronson Publ., 1977.

⁴ The original meaning of the related word in Greek—*martirion*--is a testimony. Thus the sense of it is a testimony of faith, demonstrated by sacrificing one's life for God. See Babylonian Talmud (BT) Sanhedrin 74a

For a definition of martyrdom see, for example, Rofe A. *The prophetic Stories. The Narratives about the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1988).

serve God? This is certainly a possible explanation.⁵ However this explanation does not take into account the goal stated explicitly by the protagonist of the story: preparation to perform kiddush haShem when the time comes. By making this man the Baal Shem Tov's neighbor in Paradise, the story communicates another important message:⁶ that in some sense this person is of equal stature to the Baal Shem Tov. This is in spite of the fact that the Baal Shem Tov's wisdom, teachings, prayers, hasidut and unique mystical experience are important components of his personality and are also important for all the people of Israel. One may even conclude that from God's point of view all the above mentioned qualities are secondary, as the most important quality is the ability and preparedness for kiddush haShem. The main message of the story seems to be the following: kiddush haShem - this is what really matters. This equivalence works in both directions: on the one hand, this person—the host in the story—serves God to no lesser extent than the Baal Shem Tov himself does. And, on the other hand, it could be understood that perhaps the most important of the Baal Shem Tov's qualities is his own readiness for kiddush haShem.

Is this just a strange and unusual story, reflecting a point of view that is on the margins of Jewish thought?

Or, alternatively, does this story contain important and central ideas expressing a world-view held by significant groups of Jews at various times in our history?

It is no surprise that the places to look for the development of such ideas are the most difficult periods in Jewish history. These include the Emperor Hadrian's persecutions, persecutions during the Crusades, the pogroms of Bogdan Chmelnitzki, and the 20th century destruction and extermination of European Jewry at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators.

Two Types of Kiddush Hashem According to Maimonides

In *Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* 5, Maimonides describes in detail the laws of kiddush haShem:

כל בית ישראל מצווין על קדוש השם הגדול הזה שנאמר ונקדשתי בתוך בני ישראל. ומוזהרין שלא לחללו שנאמר ולא תחללו את שם קדשי. כיצד כשיעמוד עובד כוכבים ויאנוס את ישראל לעבור על אחת מכל מצות האמורות בתורה או יהרגנו יעבור ואל יהרג שנאמר במצות אשר יעשה אותם האדם וחי בהם. וחי בהם ולא שימות בהם. ואם מת ולא עבר הרי זה מתחייב בנפשו. במה דברים אמורים בשאר מצות חוץ מעבודת כוכבים וגלוי

⁵ Nathan Kara-Ivanov (personal communication)

⁶ Michael Kravtsov (personal communication)

**ערייות ושפיכת דמים. אבל שלש עבירות אלו אם יאמר לו עבור על אחת מהן או תהרג.
יהרג ואל יעבור...**

All the House of Israel is commanded regarding [the commandment of] 'kiddush haShem' (sanctification of the great and holy name). As it says in scripture (Vayikra 22: 32), 'I shall be made holy within the children of Israel.'

Also, we are warned not to disgrace His [name]. As it says (ibid), 'Do not disgrace My holy name.'

How [does one make holy God's name]? [For example,] during a time when a non-Jew attempts to force a Jew to desecrate one of the commandments that are stated in the Torah or be killed, [the Jew] should desecrate the commandment. This is because it is stated in scripture (Vayikra 18:5) regarding the commandments "that a man will perform [them] and LIVE BY THEM." Not die by them!

If someone dies instead of desecrating the commandment, then he is himself guilty of a capital offense.

Which case is the first halacha speaking of (that one must violate the commandment rather than give up his or her life)? The case of any commandment besides idol worship, illicit relations and bloodshed. However, regarding these three sins, if one is given the choice of transgressing or being killed, one must die rather than transgress.

The beginning of Maimonides's formulation of this commandment is unique, as it is the first place in his work that mentions the category "all the House of Israel" explicitly. In fact, Maimonides sees the obligation of kiddush haShem as that which defines who belongs to the House of Israel.⁷

At the end of the same chapter Maimonides emphasizes that people must be careful about how they behave, because any inappropriate behavior that causes other people to criticize them is considered to be a *hillul haShem* (desecration of the Divine name, the opposite of kiddush haShem). In general the concept of kiddush haShem is expanded there by Maimonides to be a principle in how Jews should conduct themselves during their lives.

⁷ I learned about the special status of kiddush haShem in Maimonides from Michael Shneider's article "Philosophy and Halacha in Maimonides' Works" in *Mishne Torah. Sefer Mada*. Ed. B. Gorin. Leham, 2010. pp 25-60. (Russ).

Maimonides does not mention at all the need to prepare for martyrdom during one's lifetime. The only way we can connect between the obligation of martyrdom, as described in the beginning of Chapter 5 of Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah and quoted above, and Maimonides's discussion of kiddush haShem during one's lifetime, which is the subject of the end of that chapter, is through the intrinsic meaning of kiddush haShem.⁸ The common denominator of these two types of kiddush haShem in essence is giving testimony to God's existence and presence in the world, and this is manifested both in Jewish life and death.

We do not, then, find a halachic basis in Maimonides for the behavior of the Besht's future neighbor in Gan Eden, as described in the first section of this article. Might we be able to find in other Jewish sources a requirement to prepare during one's lifetime for martyrdom?

Normative Behavior and More Extreme Positions

In her book *Hidden in Thunder*, Esther Farbstein makes the following remarks about martyrdom and normative behavior in Judaism:⁹

Dying for kiddush haShem was not usually something people were expected to do a priori; even individuals are forbidden to voluntarily put themselves in a situation that would require them to die for the sake of kiddush haShem. For instance, according to Sedei Hemed, a major halachic work:

When a person is picked upon by chance to transgress, he is commanded to sanctify God's name publicly. But he should not put himself in a position that will lead to kiddush haShem, because that is not what God wants. This is why Torah did not write explicitly about Abraham's experience in Ur of Chaldees. Similarly, R. Akiba said "When will I have the opportunity to fulfill it?"¹⁰

Since Jewish law generally forbids giving one's life in order to do a mitzvah, the discussion among halachic authorities revolved not around whether one must give one's life for every mitzvah but whether it is permissible to do so (when none of the three cardinal sins is

⁸ For an analysis of the meaning of kiddush haShem in Tanach and Talmud, see, for example, I. Greenvald "Kiddush Hashem: Biruro Shel Musag, and Y. Bart, Yeshivat Har Etzion, Alon Shvut <http://www.etzion.org.il/dk/1to899/812mamar1.htm>

⁹ Farbstein E., *Hidden in Thunder: Perspectives on Faith, Halachah and Leadership during the Holocaust*. Transl. by Stern D., (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2007), pp. 441-442.

¹⁰ Medini, *Sedei Hemed*, Pe'at ha-Sadeh, Kelalim A, section 18 (vol. 1, f. 92a). The idea is that R. Akiba did not put himself in the situation, but when the opportunity presented itself, he did what he had to do (see also *Shnei Luhot Habrit* on this subject- as brought below). Compare this explanation of R. Akiba's behavior with what is suggested by Maharsha and the Piaseczner Rebe, as discussed at the end of this article.

involved). Some authorities permitted it only to those who act with extra piety in all aspects of their lives:

If he is a great pious man and sees that the generation is dissolute in this matter, he may sanctify the name of God and give his life even for a minor precept, so that the people see and learn to fear God.¹¹

This allowing of martyrdom for an exceptionally righteous person applies even when it is not a time of forced apostasy. In a time of forced apostasy, however, the halacha requires giving one's life.

A radical position regarding kiddush haShem developed later among certain communities in Germany starting in the First Crusade (1096) and in the twelfth century: it required not only passively letting themselves be killed for refusing to transgress, but actively killing themselves and their families.

Historians have called this latter phenomenon “active kiddush haShem” or “active martyrdom”.

According to A. Gross,¹² “normally martyrdom is defined as the act of being killed by the persecutor, while the martyr plays the passive role of willingly accepting death for his religion or belief. Active martyrdom, therefore, includes cases in which the victim plays an active role in the killing, namely suicide and/or killing one's family members and/or co-religionists.”

Intuitively, it seems that the “neighbor of the Besht” may have something in common with those Jews who performed active martyrdom in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The mystery and paradoxes of active martyrdom in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, however, require a separate discussion, which is outside the scope of our inquiry.

The Story of R. Akiba's Martyrdom

¹¹ *Kessef Mishneh* on Maimonides, Hilchot Yesodei Ha-Torah 5:4.

¹² Gross, A., *Struggling with Tradition. Reservations about Active Martyrdom in the Middle Ages*. The Brill Reference Library of Judaism, v19. (Leiden, Boston 2004), p. X.

The story of R. Akiba's martyrdom from BT Berachot 61b occupies an important place in all subsequent discussions of the laws and practices of martyrdom:

בשעה שהוציאו את רבי עקיבא להריגה זמן קריאת שמע היה, והיו סורקים את בשרו במסרקות של ברזל, והיה מקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים. אמרו לו תלמידיו רבינו עד כאן? אמר להם: כל ימי הייתי מצטער על פסוק זה "בכל נפשך" אפילו נוטל את נשמתך ... אמרתי מתי יבא לידי ואקיימנו? ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו? היה מאריך באחד עד שיצתה נשמתו באחד. יצתה בת קול ואמרה: אשריך רבי עקיבא שיצאה נשמתך באחד. אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא: זו תורה וזו שכרה? ...

When R. Akiba was taken out to be executed, it was time to recite *Sh'ma*. As they flayed him with iron combs, he accepted the dominion of Heaven. His disciples said to him, 'our teacher, thus far?' He said to them, 'All my life I have been troubled by this verse "with all your soul," i.e., "even if He takes your soul." I said, "When will I have the opportunity to fulfill it?" Now that I have the opportunity, should I not do so?' He prolonged the word *ehad* ['one'] until he expired while saying it. A heavenly voice came forth and proclaimed, 'Fortunate are you, Akiba, that you expired on the word *ehad*!' The ministering angels said to the Holy One, blessed be He, 'Is this Torah and this its reward?...'”¹³

As I have already mentioned in the previous chapter, normative halacha does not require the ordinary person to follow R. Akiba's example.¹⁴

This is also the understanding of R. Isaiah Horowitz (1565-1630) in his book *Shnei Luchot Habrit*.¹⁵

The author of the *Ein Yaacov* commentary to the Talmud (Rabbi Jacob ben Solomon ibn Habib, 1460–1516) even found it necessary to explain that R. Akiba had special (personal) reasons for his behavior, as he was the descendent of Sisera (born from Yael), who cruelly oppressed Israel, as it is written in Judges 4:2-3:

וַיִּמָּכְרוּ יִהוֹנָתָן בֶּן־נִנְיָ מֶלֶךְ כְּנָעַן אֲשֶׁר מָלַךְ בְּחָצוֹר וְיִשָּׂרָאֵל סִיסְרָא וְהוּא יוֹשֵׁב בְּחֶרֶשֶׁת הַגּוֹיִם: וַיַּצַּעְקוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל יְהוָה כִּי תָשַׁע מֵאוֹת רֶכֶב בְּרָזָל לוֹ וְהוּא לֶחֶץ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחֶזֶקָה עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה

¹³ This translation is from E. Farbstein (see ref. 9), p 452.

¹⁴ The normative halacha would seem to require R. Akiba to "go underground" and stop teaching Torah in public so as not to be subject to the Roman death penalty (see the Maharsha explanation below).

¹⁵ R. Isaiah Horowitz, *Shnei Luchot Habrit* as brought in the Anaf Yosef commentary to the *Ein Yaacov* on BT Berachot 61a.

And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-hagoyim. Then the people of Israel cried out to the Lord for help, for he had 900 chariots of iron and he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years.

The midrash *Tanhuma* explains that “he oppressed the people of Israel cruelly” means that Sisera cursed and blasphemed against the people of Israel.

According to this approach, R. Akiba performed kiddush haShem to repair the damage caused by his ancestor. As R. Akiba had special reasons for his behavior, we cannot learn from his conduct how an ordinary person should behave.

Let us examine what the disciples meant by asking ‘our teacher, thus far?’, and what R. Akiba’s answer to them meant.

Simple Interpretation of the R. Akiba Story

In my opinion, the simple interpretation of the dialog between R. Akiba and his disciples goes as follows:

The disciples ask R. Akiba why he is continuing to recite *Sh’ma* despite the torture, which normally would release a person from the usual (positive) religious obligations. Not only does R. Akiba continue to fulfill this commandment; not only does he say the words and formally keeps the commandment, but he also has the required level of intention for the Talmud to refer to his fulfillment of the commandment as “accepting the dominion of Heaven”.

According to this explanation, if we would paraphrase the disciples’ question, it would be: “Our teacher, are you going to go that far with the obligation to accept the dominion of Heaven and with the obligation to perform of the commandment? Do you really believe that this suffering is sent to you from Heaven? Is this Torah and this its reward?”¹⁶

It could be that as R. Akiba was undergoing the torture the disciples were reminded of Job, who under terrible suffering raised his arguments against God’s justice...

¹⁶ I am grateful to R. Avraham Entelis and R. Uri Kaluzhny for the detailed discussion of these interpretations.

R. Akiba's answer to his disciples was that he does not have any doubt regarding the need to accept the dominion of Heaven during the torture, since he sees this as a precious opportunity to be able to perform the commandment "and you should love...[God]... with all your soul" to the fullest extent, i.e. "even if He takes your soul."¹⁷

According to this understanding, R. Akiba's response reveals a totally different attitude from that of Job. He is prepared to bear the suffering, since for him this is the highest expression of his love for God.

Maharsha's Interpretations of the R. Akiba Story

The Maharsha, (R. Samuel Eidels, 1555-1631) in his commentary to BT Brahot 61b suggests two different interpretations of this story.¹⁸

According to both explanations of the Maharsha, the disciples asked a purely halachic question:

As R. Akiba was not being forced to transgress one of the three most severe prohibitions,¹⁹ he should have chosen to live, and not to pursue martyrdom by insisting on teaching Torah in public, because Jewish law does not require martyrdom in this case.

I could paraphrase the disciples' question as follows: "Our teacher, thus far are you going to go in performing the commandment to teach Torah in public, even when there is a death penalty for such activity? In fact, you are even prohibited to do so, as the Torah itself commanded us to choose life in

¹⁷ See Mishna Berachot 9:5

¹⁸ ובעובדא דרע"ק דשמעתין דמסר נפשו על ביטול תורה היינו בשעת השמד, כדאמרינן התם דבשעת השמד אפילו על מצוה קלה יהרג ואל יעבור. ועוד דר"ע בפרהסיא הוה, כדאמר מקהיל קהלות ברבים. ובפרהסיא אמרינן התם דאפילו על מצוה קלה יהרג ואל יעבור. ובזה יפול קושית הרא"ם על פירש"י בפרק בן סורר שפירש דבכל נפשך מיירי בעבודת כוכבים בלבד היינו שלא תמירנו בעבודת כוכבים, ובחומש פירש סתם דכן הוא בכל המצות, דלאו קושיא היא דהתם בגמרא אפילו בצנעה ואפילו שלא בשעת שמד איירי, ודוקא בעבודת כוכבים אבל בפרהסיא א"נ בשעת השמד בשאר מצות נמי איירי האי קרא דבכל נפשך דיהרג ואל יעבור, שאמר ועכשיו שבא לידי לא אקיימנו? ולפי דברי התוס' כדאמר נמי התם וכדמסיק הכא בעובדא דרע"ק שכתבו בפרק אין מעמידין ע"פ הירושלמי דאם רצה אדם להחמיר על עצמו אפילו בשאר מצות שרי, איכא למימר דר"ע נמי מחמיר על עצמו היה. ואפשר שזהו שאמרו ליה תלמידיו רבי עד כאן? דהיינו וכי עד כאן חייב אדם למסור עצמו גם בשאר מצות? והשיב להם כל ימי הייתי מצטער כו' ורצוני בכך להחמיר על עצמי אפילו בשאר מצות ודו"ק:

¹⁹ Idol worship, illicit relations and murder – see BT Sanhedrin 74a

situations when other commandments (besides the three most severe prohibitions) are involved!”

In this interpretation by the Maharsha, the disciples’ question is not related to the reciting of *Sh’ma*, but rather to the commandment of teaching Torah in public.

R. Akiba’s answer to his disciples was that this specific case of it being public (*Parhesia*), as well as the general climate of official *selective* persecution of Jews (*Shaata HaShmad*), make the situation entirely different.

The Maharsha offers a second interpretation of R. Akiba’s answer to the same question of his disciples:

Even without the parameters of it being public (*Parhesia*) and under conditions of official persecution of Jews (*Shaata HaShmad*), a person is still *permitted* to voluntarily choose martyrdom. R. Akiba’s lifelong wish was to be more strict (*Lehahmir*) with himself, even in this case where martyrdom is not normatively required.

R. Isaac Luria’s Interpretation of the R. Akiba Story

R. Isaac Luria (1534-1572) differentiates between two types of martyrdom: *actual* martyrdom and *potential* martyrdom.²⁰ In actual martyrdom, the

²⁰ R. Issac Luria’s explanations (*Sefer HaKavanot*, Drush Nefilat Apaim) are brought from the *Book of Benayahu Ben Yehoyada* (commentary to BT Berachot 61b):

ומה שא"ל תלמידיו רבינו עד כאן, נראה לי בס"ד על פי מ"ש רבינו האר"י ז"ל בספר הכונות דרוש נפ"א, שמסירת נפש על קדוש השם הוא בשני אופנים, הא' בכח, דהיינו בכונת הלב בתיבת אחד, וזהו מנהגן של כל הצדיקים לכוין בק"ש בכל פעם, והב' מסירה בפועל כענין רבי עקיבא וחביריו, ובאותו זמן שנהרגו בו עשרה הרוגי מלוכה לא היה מספיק לתיקון העולם מסירה בכח בלבד, אלא צריך מסירה בפועל, וכן עשו רבי עקיבא וחביריו עיין שם, והנה רבי עקיבא כשהיו סורקין בשרו וקורא קריאת שמע היה עושה מסירת נפש בכונה, אך תלמידיו ראו והרגישו שהוא משתוקק לעשות בפועל, שהוא שמח אם תצא נפשו ביסורין אלו, כדי שבזה יקיים מצות קדושת השם בפועל, והם לא ניחא להו בזה כי רוצים שישאר חי וינצל כדי שישתו מן מימי תורתו, ולכן כשהוא מכוין במסירת נפש בכונת הלב, א"ל תלמידיו רבינו עד כאן, רצונו לומר די לך בכח עד כאן תעשה שהוא מסירת נפש בכח, ולמה אתה משתוקק למסירת נפש בפועל, ואין אתה מתפלל שתנצל מן הגזרה הזאת כי למימך אנחנו צריכין, ואם צריך לעולם תיקון של מסירה בפועל יהיה זה על ידי אחרים, והשיב כל ימי הייתי מצטער שיתקיים תיקון זה של מסירה בפועל על ידי, ומה שאמר היה מאריך באחד אין זה מקושר עם דברים שא"ל תלמידיו והשיב להם, אלא זה קאי ומקושר עם מ"ש והיה מקבל עליו עול מלכות שמים, והש"ס הביא דברי תלמידיו ותשובתו באמצע, ואלו הדברים של תלמידיו היו ביום אחד קודם יום שנפטר בו, וכמ"ש לעיל, ודבר זה הוא מוכרח על פי מדרש רבותינו ז"ל במשלי, דמפורש בעת שיצאה נשמתו לא היה אחר מתלמידיו אצלו ולא ידעו בו, עד שבא אליהו זכור לטוב וגילה על פטירתו:

person actually gives his life, as in the case of the Ten Martyrs including R. Akiba. In potential martyrdom, the act is performed only through meditation and intention of the heart while pronouncing (and concentrating on) the word “One” (“Ehad”) of the verse Sh’ma Yisrael. According to the explanation of R. Isaac Luria, the disciples of R. Akiba perceived his desire to switch from passive martyrdom to actual martyrdom.

Thus the disciples’ question could be paraphrased as follows: “Our teacher, so great is your desire to perform the actual kiddush haShem that you will leave us without a teacher?! Please instead perform only a potential kiddush haShem and continue your presence in this world to teach us; the actual kiddush haShem can be performed by somebody else!”

R. Akiba’s answer to his disciples was that this is exactly what he dreamed about all his life: that he will perform the actual kiddush haShem himself...

Two Types of Love of God?

At first glance, R. Issac Luria’s explanation fits well with Prof. Michael Fishbein’s “substitution” theory, which describes two main types of love of God in Judaism:²¹

Two main types [of the love of God] can be discerned: the act of martyrdom, whereby the faithful commit their life in witness to the wholehearted love of God in their souls; and the quest for spiritual perfection, whereby the philosopher or mystic (and even the scrupulous adherent to the law) directs total attention to God and longs to cleave to the divine reality with such intensity as to die to his self and this world.

The patterns and practices of both types vary; but since they are expressive of two fundamentally different religious acts, rarely overlap. For surely the ideal of spiritual perfection indicated by the exhortation "to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to cleave to Him" (Deut. 11:22) is distinct from the desire to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut. 6:5) when the devoted commitment of one's soul means a martyrological death, as an ancient and influential rabbinic interpretation put it (Mishnah Berachot 9.5). If the first ideal thus advocates an ongoing religious praxis, cumulative over one's lifetime and guided by the commandments (as interpreted in ethical, mystical, or philosophical ways), the second counsels an ever-present readiness for the ultimate commitment. Indeed, while imbued with

²¹ M. Fishbein, “The Imagination of Death in Jewish Spirituality”, in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, ed. by Collins and Fishbane, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp 183-184.

normative characteristics (in terms of proper performance), martyrdom is a disruptive and one-time religious act.

Given these clearly distinct patterns, it will therefore be of interest to observe how the two types have been correlated and, even more, how the routine of ritual practice has provided substitutes for the martyrological ideal.

As Fishbein explains, the first type of love for God is expressed in the decisive and ultimate act of martyrdom, whereas the second type demands that life continue, but under the extreme condition that the person demonstrates total devotion to God. This uncompromising devotion implies a kind of “death” of the more self-centered behavior and way of life that would show a desire to be independent of God. According to Fishbein the second type of martyrdom “substitutes” for the first type.

Later in his article, Fishbein quotes the words of Rabbi Moshe De Leon from *Sefer ha-Rimmon*,²² a thirteenth-century commentary on the commandments.

Every person who loves his Creator, whenever he reaches the verse "and you shall love (etc.)" in the recitation of the Shema, should direct his mind and thoughts towards the love of his Maker, as if (in Heb. *ke'ilu*) he were giving up his soul for His sake in love, with absolute sincerity, and accepting death upon himself. And it is obligatory upon each person to resolve [lit., determine; *ligmor be-nafsho*] this matter daily. And this is like what (the sages meant when) they said, "For your sake we are killed all day long, and regarded as sheep for the slaughter." And how splendid if he employs this intention daily in the love of his Maker, and to devote his soul for His sake, as we have said; and He, may He be blessed, wants intention [in worship].

Although Fishbein's analysis of the Jewish texts as these ideas developed over the course of history is extremely impressive and his compilation of the factual material very comprehensive, in the end I am not persuaded by his splitting of the love of God into two different components. It seems to me that the one God would want a wholesome integrated and undivided love from man.

Piaseczner Rebbe's Interpretation of the R. Akiba Story

²² *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses De Leon's Sefer Ha-Rimon*, ed. E.R. Wolfson (Atlanta, 1988), 225-226.

Thus far I have presented several different ways to understand the exchange between R. Akiba and his disciples. Let us now examine yet another, more contemporary, interpretation: given by the Piaseczner Rebbe²³ (Rav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira) in the Ghetto of Warsaw.

In the summer of 1941, amidst starvation and extremely high mortality in the Warsaw ghetto, the Piaseczner Rebbe addressed the question that R. Akiba's disciples had asked their teacher:

We are forced to conclude that when the disciples asked “Our Teacher, thus far?” they were not referring to the matter of R. Akiba's death at all... The disciples were watching him submit to the yoke of heavenly dominion... They were not asking him a question at all, but were wondering about how it was possible for R. Akiba to concentrate on reciting the *Sh'ma*, accept upon himself the yoke of heaven, and meditate on the word “One” in the midst of such agony, while his flesh was being raked with iron combs.

He answered them, “All my days I have been at pains over the verse in the *Sh'ma*... ‘When will I ever have the opportunity of fulfilling it properly?’ I asked myself...” R. Akiba was saying, “Not only did I desire to fulfill this commandment properly, I was also in pain at being unable to fulfill it.” Therefore, “it was both my desire and my pain,” says R. Akiba, “that brought down so much Divine Light that even under torture I am not disconcerted. I am able to don the yoke of heavenly dominion while concentrating and meditating.”²⁴

The Piaseczner Rebbe first clarified that the question of R. Akiba's disciples was: “How are you managing to concentrate on the commandment of reading *Sh'ma* while you are experiencing such great suffering?” Then, explained the Rebbe, R. Akiba's answer may be understood in the following vein: “You are correct; the pain of torture would normally interfere with one's concentration. However, I am nonetheless able to concentrate on the fulfillment of the commandment, because I have been preparing for this moment my entire life.”

R. Akiba's response embodies the Piaseczner Rebbe's own message to his audience in the ghetto: that only lengthy preparation had enabled R. Akiba to do what he did in those moments. Thus, the Piaseczner Rebbe used the

²³ The original text of this interpretation can be found in Shapira, *Sacred Fire*, Parshat Ekev (Jerusalem 5720 (1959/60)), pp110-111. The English translation of this interpretation is taken from Farbstein E., *Hidden in Thunder*, p.45.

²⁴R. Shapira, *Sacred Fire*, Chap. 11, “The Teachings of the Piaseczner Rebbe in the Warsaw Ghetto”. pp. 205-206.

classical Talmudic text to facilitate a discussion of how to have faith in such situations. The Piaseczner Rebbe chose this interpretation in an attempt to prepare his own followers for the mitzvah of kiddush haShem.

Yishayhu Gafni,²⁵ in his discussion of the Piaseczner Rebbe's explanation, points out the synthesis of the two types of Kiddush Hashem: the type that requires consistent exemplary behavior throughout one's entire life, and the type that takes place in an instant, at the critical moment before death.

Conclusion

The connection between martyrdom and observing of the various commandments during one's lifetime is also mentioned in the 19th and 25th chapters of *Likutei Amarim (Tanya)*.²⁶ These chapters discuss the extremely important concept that understands the love of God as a kind of a fire, light or spark concealed in the soul of every Jew. This fire bursts out both during martyrdom and through the study of Torah and performance of the commandments in the regular life of a Jew.²⁷

So we can see that there is indeed a connection between various Jewish deeds and practices performed during one's lifetime and martyrdom. Instead of Fishbein's "substitution" theory, discussed above in this article, I would dare to suggest a kind of complementarity theory, according to which the study of the laws, precedents and intentions of kiddush haShem directs a person's mind and thoughts towards the love of his Maker, as if (*ke'ilu*) he were giving up his soul for His sake.

²⁵ "Sanctity of Life and Martyrdom", *Studies in Memory of Amir Yekutiel*. Gafni I.M. and Ravitsky A., eds. (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1992), p.5.

²⁶ Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, *Likutei Amarim Tanya*, (Kehot Pub. Soc., 1996), Chapters 19 and 25.

²⁷ The view of life as a preparation for death is familiar to us in a different, non-Jewish, context as well. The philosophical position of Socrates, expressed in Plato's *Phaedo*, defines preparation for death as an ethical axis that gives life sense and a purpose. This position seems to be not related to kiddush haShem (at least directly), and is not a main stream of the Jewish thought.

To close the circle, let us return to the story about the neighbor of the Besht in Gan Eden with which this article began. The described person is an ignorant man, and still he devotes his life to preparation for kiddush haShem (as he understands it). The idea contained therein can find some support in Hassidic thinking during the most difficult periods of Jewish history, as we have seen. I failed to find in the earlier Jewish sources any trace of a requirement to prepare for kiddush haShem during one's lifetime. Although the idea of the preparation for martyrdom is popular in the (early and later) Christian sources,²⁸ I am not persuaded by the hypothesis that its appearance in Hassidic thought is a result of the influence of the Christians on Jews. My intuition tells me that here we are rather dealing with a kind of return of an old Jewish idea, after it had undergone various transformations in "alien fields". After all, Jews are commanded to love God "even if He takes your soul", according to the most authoritative interpretations of the commandment,²⁹ and it is no accident that the Talmudic discussion of this commandment in BT Berachot 61b contains the story of Rabbi Akiba, various interpretations of which were brought in this article. The reflection and consideration of this story had indeed become a cornerstone of Jewish education and mentality.³⁰

In summary, it seems that lifelong preparation for kiddush haShem — including meditation in the prayer and detailed study of the subject—is an important issue for the modern Jewish national and religious self-understanding, and is an integral part of kiddush haShem itself.

Fishbein (whose work was discussed in an earlier section of this article) analyses a formulation found in BT Megillah 31b which is related to the conclusion of a "dialogue" between God and Abraham. The latter asks how Israel can be protected from punishments for sins when the Temple service does not exist, and he is told:

²⁸ See, for example, Boyarin, D., *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

²⁹ See Mishna Berachot 9:5

³⁰ In this context see the arguments that were catalyzed in academic circles by W. H. C. Frend's statement, that "martirion" is the essence of the Jewish religion. In his view, it was the "Jewish psychology of martyrdom" that inspired Christian martyrdom. See ref. 28 for the discussion of this issue.

"I [God] have already established for them 'an order of sacrifices,' [so that] whenever they read from them (i.e. from their textual sources in the Torah) I consider [Israel] as if (*ke'ilu*) they are offering a sacrifice before Me and I then forgive all their sins"!

This is the second time in our study that we have encountered the expression “as if” (*ke'ilu*) in the classical Jewish sources. Whenever the Jews merely read ‘the order of sacrifices’, God considers them “as if” they are actually offering a sacrifice.

The previous instance of “as if” was above in the section of this article entitled “Two Types of Love for God”, where we brought the words of Rabbi Moshe De Leon, according to which the person, “whenever he reaches the verse ‘and you shall love (etc.)’ in the recitation of the Shema, should direct his mind and thoughts towards the love of his Maker, as if (*ke'ilu*) he were giving up his soul for His sake in love, with absolute sincerity, and accepting death upon himself”.

I would like to extrapolate this idea further, and suggest another kind of “as if”, which seems to be a (modern) complement for the two mentioned above: we may hope that our study of the history and precedents of martyrdom is also considered as if (*ke'ilu*) we ourselves took part in them.

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